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GIFTED PROGRAMMING MUST BE INDIVIDUALIZED FOR EACH GIFTED STUDENT

Do pullout programs and gifted classes focused on one specific topic provide an appropriate gifted education?

A great number of districts in Pennsylvania provide gifted programming to students through the use of a pullout program or, alternatively, the use of a gifted class that is open only to gifted students. This is especially true in many middle schools and high schools around the commonwealth. The question is, despite the popularity of such programs, are they proper and in line with the governing regulations? Unfortunately, the answer is that many such programs are not in complete conformity with the law.

Gifted education in Pennsylvania is governed by regulations set forth at 22 Pa. Code §§16.1 – 16.65 (Chapter 16 regulations). Chapter 16 makes it clear that each district “shall” provide “gifted education for each gifted student which is based on the unique needs of the student, not solely on the student’s classification” (22 Pa. Code §16.2(d)(2)). Elsewhere, Chapter 16 indicates that placement decisions regarding the gifted student shall be based upon “the gifted student’s needs” (22 Pa. Code §16.41(a)).

Chapter 16 thus makes it clear that gifted services must be individualized and based upon each student’s unique and specific requirements. Initially, this would appear to be in direct opposition to the gifted “programs” that many districts operate for gifted students. Those programs tend to take all students identified as gifted and place them into one class or into one large pullout program. All gifted students then generally study a main topic (i.e., the history of ancient Egypt or a science topic) and perform additional (enrichment) work on that topic. Gifted Individualized Education Plans (GIEPs) for each student are generally written around such classes/programs. But do these classes/programs actually speak to each student’s “unique need?”

Obviously, for some students, the pullout program or gifted class would, in fact, fulfill the requirement of providing an appropriate gifted education based upon that student’s particular needs. If the student is gifted in written expression, and the pullout program allows the student to write a report or do creative writing beyond the general curriculum, it would likely be proper under Chapter 16. However, it is virtually impossible that such “cookie cutter” programs are meeting the unique needs of *all* gifted students. A student who is gifted in math is not being appropriately educated under Chapter 16, for example, when a pullout program teaches him/her about butterflies or Shakespearean sonnets.

Many districts are lulled into a sense of false security regarding gifted programming because, frankly, many parents (especially those of middle and high school aged children) are more concerned about the fact that their child is gifted than about the content of any gifted programming offered by the district. Moreover, many middle and high school gifted students see GIEPs as simply calling for additional work, not enriching or accelerating their education as contemplated by Chapter 16. As such, many districts are blissfully unaware that their gifted programs would not withstand the scrutiny of an audit or a due process hearing.

Districts should thus look closely at their gifted programming. Most often, scrapping an entire program is not necessary (and certainly is not desired). Instead, sufficient individualization within the parameters of the gifted class or

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pullout program can be accomplished. For example, studying ancient Greece may allow some students to concentrate on the architecture, some on the mathematical concepts that were being taught in ancient Greece, others on the actual history, and still others on the creative arts that were flourishing at the time. The key to complying with the regulations is to find, in any situation, enrichment and/or acceleration opportunities that are crafted to the unique needs of each particular student.

Clients who have questions regarding issues discussed in this article, or any education law matter, should feel free to call us at 215-345-9111.

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